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## Lero: Elf Hero



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### Chapter 1 by Phantim

“You need to go now! Lero take her!” Jared commanded as he shoved the priestess into Lero’s arms and then pushed him into the stairwell. “Ú-firo i laiss e-guil gîn. Goodbye son, I love you.” Lero turned around as his father pulled the stone door shut again, locking himself on the outside.

“No! Father no! Don’t leave me!” Tears streamed down his face. “Open it...” he said looking at the priestess who now lay in his arms.

“No,” she replied with a fierceness in her blue eyes that frustrated him.

“Honor his wish to keep you safe. That wall will not keep the creatures out for long. Your father knew that. Do not waste the precious time he has given us.”

“No, I can’t---” Lero is interrupted as his love put her hand on his shoulder.

“Please Lero, I’m scared. Let’s go! Listen to me!” she pleaded.

Lero wiped the tears off his face by rubbing his eyes into his shoulder. his now dirty shirt

absorbing the tears. Then began to move down the stairs with the priestess in his arms. It was extremely dark and even with his

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tunnel in a ghostly light that seemed to drain the color out of everything it touched. Still, it would get the job done. Lero began to move through the tunnel at increased speed... it wasn't long before he heard the crunch of stone behind him, they were in the tunnels now too.

## Chapter 2 by Phantim



The three began running, their hearts pounded loudly as they rushed through the dark, unlit halls. Sounds echoed behind them spurring them even faster. Capture now would mean death, torture, or worse. The druids had gone mad and could not be trusted any longer. Some of their friends had already been killed. Still, there was nothing to say that the underground tunnels would be any safer...

## Chapter 3 by Stan Johnson



*How can I just leave my own father?* Lero asked himself, barely seeing the tunnel for his tears. *But Annara; she can't die to those...things.* That thought steeled his resolve, and helped him press on through the memories of his childhood. Through visions of his father taking him fishing, for the first time, or showing him how to test the balance of a sword, or Father gently kissing Mother when Lero's first sibling was born.

Mother was dead, now. And Father too, though his siblings may be safe, provided Aunt Fey had gotten them out when Father had commanded her too. Unable to process the thought of being orphaned, he squeezed his fiancée's hand tighter, and surged forward.

The druids, however, were not the men he remembered; deliberate, elderly men, most of them, whose walks in the forest were unhurried for more reasons than just a desire to quietly commune with nature. Whatever they had become, they were stronger, more agile--faster. And from the sound of it, they were nearly upon them. He hazarded a glance at Annara; her face was a mask of naked terror, and she wasn't looking back.

Something inside made him whirl, his blade flashing up with the habit of years of training. The cold steel met resistance as it parted the monster's breast, earning an inhuman howl of pain. A

mighty swipe took him in the side of the head nonetheless, and the beast was upon him, its face barely human as it foamed and growled. He could not fight back, but he was just out of boyhood and not even a man yet.

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"Lero!" Annara's kick lashed into the creature's skull, snapping its head sideways. The monster grunted, then blasted her aside with a backhand slap. It rammed its fist into Lero's gut, then leapt for the elven priestess

"Annara!" Lero wheezed, rolling onto his side and staggering to rise.

The priestess chanted a frantic spell, and a blaze of light exploded from her hand. The druid screeched, covering its eyes, and even Lero was blinded. A hand seized his cuff and jerked him to his feet. "*Come on!*"

Lero made to run, but halted, nearly jerking Annara to a halt. "Lero, what are you--" He ignored her, and snatched his sword from the ground. Already, the druid seemed to be recovering. Not wasting a moment, Lero hefted the blade, and brought it down in a swift, furious motion that separated the brute's head from its shoulders.

"One less," he huffed. Hearing the rest too close for comfort, he held onto Annarra--as much to keep himself upright as to protect her--and together they fled.

He could only hope to see the next sunrise.

#### Chapter 4 by Stan Johnson



Ten, frantic minutes later, Lero and Annara lay face down in the crevice of a large slab of rock. The mad druids had been relentless in their pursuit, chasing them on all fours, like wild beasts. The pair had been lucky to slay even the first one; the second one they'd only managed to delay long enough to get some distance, and Annara had earned a nasty gash on her leg in the process. When they'd stumbled into what looked like the altar chamber of an abandoned, subterranean temple, Lero had been certain that death was only moments away.

Yet fate had smiled on them, if weakly, and their panicked search for another way out had uncovered a gap beneath the altar's platform. For lack of a better option, they had crammed themselves into it. Annara had prepared a basic illusion spell—the image of the two of them

dead in a side corridor—but Lero could only invoke the words that the illusion would last long enough, and, somehow, fool the

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reassuringly, desperate for a way out.

*Why do they even want us dead in the first place?* he asked himself. *These were good men. Holy men. What happened to them?*

Then it occurred to him—they wanted him dead. If he gave them what they wanted, it may be enough to distract them from Annara. His heart clenched at the idea; he was more than willing to give his life for her, but still, he wanted to *live*. To *marry* the priestess and raise children with her. How could they have dreamed so many dreams together, only to have them snatched away without explanation?

*But what if I don't have to die?*

Above them, the snarls and groans of the druids closed in. Lero hoped the men's change would have erased their intelligence, but he couldn't count on it. Fashioning a hasty plan, he gave Annara's hand another squeeze, and began sliding (none too quietly) out of his hiding place.

"I love you, Annara," he whispered. "If this doesn't work, always know that I loved you."

"Wait—*what?*"

Without another word, he exited the crevice. Poking his head up as little as possible, he saw two, gnarled shapes scampering around the perimeter of the room, pawing at the wall like wolves. Thankfully, their senses didn't seem to have been enhanced with their strength and speed; they took no immediate notice of him. Judging the distance to the altar, he readied himself for action. With a long, shuddering breath, and a last thought of Annara, he leapt up onto the platform, and bolted for the altar.

The druids halted immediately, and whirled on him, teeth bared. Even in the dark he could see that their eyes had turned almost milky white; he hadn't seen their otherworldly luminescence until now. The creatures raced at him, but he beat them to the altar and whipped out his dagger.

*Invoking the name of the god of this altar, I rebuke thee, and cast thee out!* Slipping the blade across the back of his hand, he whirled around. The druid appeared. Dropping to his knees, he forced his hand against the ground, and the earth trembled all his night.

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The monsters came on; they were nearly upon him now. And then they were, grabbing his arm, his leg, teeth rending his flesh. Lero screamed and writhed, but nothing happened.

“Lero!”

*Annara! No!*

“Lero! I’m com—”

A tremor rocked the chamber, and an arctic wind swept through the room, chilling Lero’s core. A presence, deep and dark, seemed to rise up from the floor, penetrating Lero’s every fiber. The druids ceased instantly, dropping Lero, and backing away with pup-like whimpers. The walls shook, and debris tumbled from the ceiling. The wall beside the rent open, spilling fresh night air in to mingle with the unearthly wind.

“I,” a gripping, basso voice intoned, “am Ekkron, Dark God of Nawim.”

Lero had never heard of such a deity, but the force, the voice, the bitter chill—they were undeniably real. The druids must have felt it too, and they scampered from the room with terror in their blank eyes.

“And you, Lero of the Elves, have set me *free!*” A feeling of exultation mingled with the frigid touch of the wind, and Lero’s heart sank.

“Lero! We need to leave!”

“What have I done?” he asked aloud, struggling to rise. The wound on his hand seemed to take on a life of its own, throbbing with an icy fire.

“No time! Quick! That gap in the wall!”

Seizing her hand, he willed himself to sprint for the rend.

“Flee if you will, little elf,” the dark god chuckled. “For you will be mine in time. You will always be mine.”

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And flee they did, shoving Lero into the deep of the night beyond his father’s catacombs. They ran, on and on, into the nearby woods, collapsing by a large

brook. Lero held her to him as she sobbed while attending to his wounds.

"I think we're safe enough," he whispered. "For the moment. We were fortunate that the druids frightened so easily."

Annara's big eyes shone up at him. "You—you've never heard of *Ekkron*?"

Lero frowned, trying to remember. "No," he said at last. "I haven't."

Annara shivered. "We're not safe, Lero. And those druids did *not* frighten easily."

Lero swallowed hard. "What are you saying, love?"

She stopped, mid-motion and tucked her chin to her chest. When she answered, her voice was like that of a frightened little girl, and not the mighty priestess he'd fallen in love with. "You may have just doomed our entire world."

Lero sucked in a breath. Somewhere in his heart—and against his will—he knew she was right.

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